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ABSTRACT

With genuine love and substantive support, educators can help the estimated 200,000 to 500,000 homeless young people in the United States enrich their personal and academic lives. After securing district office staff approval, the building principal and interested faculty can discuss homeless students' needs with the director of the local shelter and visit the shelter to observe its living conditions firsthand. The success of the process is increased when the entire school staff is involved in every phase of implementation. Teacher-led staff development--with appropriate administrative support--can provide teachers with the insights needed for helping the homeless become independent and successful. Highlighting literacy learning is vital because homeless students must become better communicators and problem solvers to work their way out of their current status. Teachers need to provide flexible curricular offerings, devise assignments that accommodate the unique lifestyles of the homeless, consider study strategies that students can learn quickly and use independently (such as SQ3R and PLAE), plan activities that are congruent in both the school and the homeless shelter, and use portfolios. Parents can be encouraged to become strong advocates to their children's education by inviting them to weekly, evening meetings. A tentative schedule might involve giving an orientation in the first meeting, explaining aspects of the instructional program at the second meeting, stressing the importance of children and youth becoming lifetime learners at the third meeting, and discussing available resources with representatives from local agencies at the fourth meeting. (RS)

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# Reaching out to homeless students

Dr. Joseph Sanacore

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In his article "Homeless Students at the School Door" (**Educational Leadership**, May 1994), George Pawlas indicates that between 225,000 and 500,000 children are homeless in the United States. These young people live in temporary shelters and attend different schools, causing significant physical, psychological, social, and educational problems. Such problems include physical abuse, eating and sleeping disorders, low self-esteem, regressive behaviors, immature peer interaction, inappropriate social interaction with adults, attention deficit disorder, and learning disabilities (see Julee Kryder-Coe, Lester Salamon, and Janice Molnar's **Homeless Children and Youth**, New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1991).

Obviously, this young, transient population has profound needs and depends on the local school as a major source of support. The following suggestions are therefore intended as initial steps toward helping homeless students.

**Who should begin the process?**

After securing the approval of district office staff, the building principal and interested faculty can seriously discuss the need for offering services to homeless students. Valuable information and sensitive insights about the homeless also can be provided by the director of the local shelter. Inviting her or him to join an informal discussion and then visiting the shelter to observe its living conditions firsthand demonstrate a genuine reaching out to a needy population.

With this foundation established, everyone can focus on the attributes of the homeless and ways in which the school can provide support. Specifically, homeless students may not be able to complete quality homework assignments because of job schedules or child-care responsibilities which interfere with the assignments. In addition, these young people may not have a quiet place to study or access to a library to do research. As a response to these obstacles, Yvonne Vissing, Dorothy Schroepfer, and Fred Bloise (**Phi Delta Kappan**, March 1994) suggest that homeless students be given alternatives, without penalties; for example, they often need more time to do homework than do their peers from a stable home environment. Homeless youth also are more apt to complete quality homework assignments when the school and library open earlier and close later. These and other concerns probably will be discussed during this beginning phase of implementing the process.

**How can we maintain the momentum?**

The success of this important process is increased when the entire staff is involved in every phase of implementation. During faculty meetings, department coordinators, content area teachers, reading specialists, guidance counselors, school psychologists, social workers, occupational therapists, library media specialists, and others should be invited to make suggestions that enhance opportunities for homeless students. To make these meetings more productive, the principal and

interested staff could pursue related professional literature and could distribute it to everyone several weeks before the meetings. Useful sources include those mentioned previously as well as Ellen Bassuk and Lynn Rosenberg's "Why Does Family Homelessness Occur? A Case-Control Study" (**American Journal of Public Health**, July 1988); Michelle Fryt Linehan's "Children Who Are Homeless: Educational Strategies for School Personnel" (**Phi Delta Kappan**, September 1992); Atelia Melaville's **What It Takes: Structuring Interagency Partnerships to Connect Children and Families with Comprehensive Services** (Washington, D.C.: William T. Grant Foundation, 1993); Yvonne Rafferty and Norma Rollins' **Learning in Limbo: The Educational Deprivation of Homeless Children** (New York: Advocates for Children of New York, Inc., September 1989); and James Stronge and V. Helm's "Residency and Guardianship Requirements as Barriers to the Education of Homeless Children and Youth" (Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, April 1990).

From such sources and related discussions, feasible roles and responsibilities may emerge. A guidance counselor may suggest organizing a "buddy system," whereby homeless students are matched with buddies who introduce them to new friends and show them the cafeteria, library, guidance office, gym, and other facilities. Content area teachers may volunteer to tutor homeless youth in the school or at the shelter. Reading and discussing the professional literature can create a renewed sense of staff comradeship as caring educators reach out to

homeless students and embrace them as an important part of the learning community.

**What role does staff development play?**

With such a caring attitude established, the stage is now set for developing strategies that will support the literacy learning of transient youth. Highlighting literacy learning is vital because homeless students must become better communicators and problem solvers to work their way out of their current status. Teacher-led staff development--with appropriate administrative support--can provide teachers with the insights needed for helping the homeless become independent and successful. The following recommendations deserve consideration:

- Develop minicourses and courses divided into segments as a way of providing homeless students with flexible curricular offerings. Vissing, Schroepfer, and Bloise believe that this flexibility provides transient learners with partial credit that they can use for a high school diploma elsewhere. Thus, an English curriculum might consist of four annual themes, such as belonging and alienation, confrontation and compromise, courage and cowardice, and good and evil (see Lance Gentile and Merna McMillan's article in the May 1992 **Journal of Reading**). The study of each theme should be comparable to a minicourse or course segment worth $\frac{1}{4}$ credit upon successful completion of related novels, short stories, poems, plays, essays, oral

presentations, or other outcomes deemed appropriate. An important role of the inservice participants is to create instructional cohesion for each theme, and a primary responsibility of the building principal is to seek approval from the district office and board of education to grant ¼ credit for a partially completed course.

- Devise student assignments that complement minicourses and course segments so that the unique lifestyles of homeless students are accommodated. Since these individuals cannot attend school regularly, they need opportunities to complete projects independently. To support this thrust, workshop participants should focus on developing a structure that provides options for individual and small-group projects related to curricular themes. These options might include (1) in English, creating a novella, short story, play, or anthology of poems concerning belonging and alienation; (2) in science, developing a model of an organism (one-celled or multicellular) that demonstrates its interaction with its environment; (3) in home and careers, writing a miniresearch paper concerning a career of interest; (4) in social studies, responding to the question "Is war ever justified?" through a drawing, painting, videotape, audiotape, drama, dance, or another medium.

- Consider strategies that students can learn quickly and use independently. SQ3R (Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review), ERRQ (Estimate, Read, Respond, Question), PLAE ( Preplanning,

Listing, Activating, Evaluating), and ConStruct (constructing graphic representations of text after each reading and rereading) are among the worthwhile strategies that are easily applied to content area material. They not only help students respond interactively to a variety of text but also guide them to have better control of the reading/studying process. In addition, they support individuals' styles and strengths; for example, ConStruct is especially appropriate for artistic students. A challenge to those involved with staff development is to create innovative ways of helping at-risk learners adapt these and other study strategies across the curriculum.

- Plan activities that are congruent in both the school and the homeless shelter. Curricular reinforcement supports cohesive, meaningful learning as it lessens isolated, fragmented instruction. Specifically, congruence involves the same or similar resources, strategies, and skills being used in both settings. One way of assuring congruence is to invite to the workshop sessions a manageable number of volunteers who are willing to visit the shelter and to provide tutorial services. These teacher and student volunteers are well aware of content area goals, concepts, and materials and therefore are able to coordinate curricular efforts between the school and the shelter. To increase the value of these efforts, subject area coordinators or teacher designees could oversee the process by assisting with the matching of tutors and tutees, locating and distributing resources, visiting and observing instruction in both settings,

and serving as liaisons for the tutors, the school principal, and the shelter director. Coordinators or their designees also should be invited to the workshop sessions so that their insights are considered and their roles are clarified.

- Establish a policy for portfolio use. Homeless students often move to different shelters and transfer to different schools, which cause significant disruptions in their learning. Not surprisingly, their problems are exacerbated when their previously attended school is slow in sending updated records to the newly attended school. Portfolio use can resolve part of this difficulty because it represents specific accomplishments and the portfolios, themselves, can be taken to the new setting by their owners. Thus, a sense of continuity in teaching and in learning is nurtured. Workshop participants need to discuss the types of artifacts to be included in the portfolios. According to Sheila Valencia (**The Reading Teacher**, January 1990), the artifacts should reflect instructional goals as well as a global view of development. They are likely to include teachers' anecdotes of students' reading behaviors, learners' self-evaluations, checklists, classroom tests, samples of students' writing, and other learning outcomes. Portfolios also are effective for gauging the range, depth, and growth of learning, and they provide students with opportunities to become acquainted with their feelings concerning their work (see Donald Graves and Bonnie Sunstein's **Portfolio Portraits**, Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1992). Over time, transient

students come to realize that although their portfolio use has given them a record of accomplishments that they can bring to a new school, it more importantly has provided them with a perspective on life.

**How can we involve needy parents?**

With patience, commitment, and administrative support, these staff development efforts will benefit homeless students. Also needed is parents' involvement, which will increase the chances of successfully helping their children. Realizing that these needy parents are struggling for survival must not allow us to forget that they are homeless, not helpless. We therefore should encourage them to become strong advocates of their children's education, as we give them hope for the next generation.

One way of reaching out to needy parents is to invite them to weekly, evening meetings. If transportation to the school is necessary, but unavailable, the meetings can be held at the homeless shelter. Sending warm invitations to the parents and providing refreshments at the meetings establish the appropriate atmosphere for discussing important concerns. Conditions are now set for the building principal, shelter director, staff volunteers, and guest speakers to share insights with the parents. Although some of the topics for certain meetings may overlap into subsequent meetings, the following tentative schedule may be helpful:

- Meeting #1. Give an orientation that highlights a genuine caring for homeless students and makes parents feel they are vital members of the community. Part of the orientation should focus on the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act. Congress passed this act in 1987 (P.L. 100-77) and reauthorized it in 1990 (P.L. 101-645). Although its overall purpose is to help the homeless, its educational intent is to provide homeless children and youth with access to the same public education received by other students. The reason for focusing on the McKinney Act is to remind homeless parents that they are not alone and that the school's role is not a condescending "act of charity" but rather an important response to their children's learning needs. At the end of the first meeting, the principal should describe the roles of support personnel and should distribute a list of their names and their school telephone numbers. The list probably will include the principal, tutors, reading specialists, department coordinators, library media specialists, guidance counselors, social workers, school psychologists, and school nurse.

- Meeting #2. Explain aspects of the instructional program, and clarify the partial-credit system if it exists. Parents also need to become aware of curricular themes, related projects, and other learning activities. In addition, voluntary tutorial services that support curricular congruence can be highlighted as a major support system for helping homeless students "catch up" with other learners. Toward the end of the meeting,

discussing portfolio use will help parents appreciate its short-term and long-term value. Parents are encouraged to review the contents of the portfolios with their children as a vehicle for discussing personal and academic growth; they also are reminded that their children own the portfolios and can bring them to their next school so that their education may progress with minimal interruptions.

- Meeting #3. Stress the importance of children and youth becoming lifetime learners. By focusing on lifetime literacy efforts, a positive sense of future emerges as parents gain insights about the empowering effects of literature. In this context, literature is described broadly to include trade books, career pamphlets, "how-to" manuals, recipe books, magazines, newspapers, and other materials. Since the homeless do not have easy access to these materials, the principal could provide the following assurances: (1) Parents and their children will be surveyed to determine their needs, interests, and wishes. (2) Materials related to the survey's results will be secured through the school library media center, the local public library, and a community book drive. (3) Materials will be placed in the children's classroom library and in the shelter library. Afterward, the need for providing time for leisure reading in the classroom and in the shelter should be highlighted, along with teachers and parents serving as reading role models. Parents who are illiterate or insecure with reading may be sensitively matched with volunteer tutors. A nice

complement to this meeting is for parents to visit the school library, to be given sufficient time for browsing and borrowing resources, and, if needed, to be provided with individual guidance. Parents also benefit from brochures and pamphlets that stress the merits of reading aloud to children as a foundation for lifetime learning.

- Meetings #4-#? Invite representatives from local agencies and community organizations to speak with homeless parents about available resources. Among the potentially supportive groups are Alcoholics Anonymous, Brighter Tomorrows (domestic violence), Catholic Charities, Child Abuse Prevention Information Resources Center, Cooperative Library System, Crisis Intervention Services, Department of Health Services, Department of Labor (employment/training), Department of Parks Recreation and Conservation, Jewish Community Services, Legal Information Tel-Law, Medical Emergency, Mental Health Association, Narcotics Anonymous, Parent-Teacher-Student Association, Social Security, Social Services, U.S. Marshals Service, and Youth Bureau. After each presentation, parents appreciate receiving materials that summarize the specific services and list the names of contact persons and their telephone numbers.

**Are there other considerations?**

Within the space limitations of this column, I have focused on initiating the process of reaching out to homeless students,

continuing the process through professional literature and related discussions, providing teacher-led staff development activities, and involving needy parents. Other approaches also deserve consideration, such as blending life skills with the curriculum (highlighting the enhancement of self-esteem), providing special education services, networking with other schools and homeless shelters, creating flexible transportation, and securing necessary funding. In addition, principals, themselves, can serve as volunteer tutors, and, if needed, they can expand tutorial services.

One way of supporting such expansion is for the principal to work cooperatively with a local college of education. For example, in "A Safety Net for Homeless Students" (**Educational Leadership, May 1994**), George Pawlas, Gail West, Carolyn Brookes, and Tracey Russell describe the efforts of undergraduate education students at the University of Central Florida who do volunteer tutoring at schools or community organizations, such as homeless shelters. As part of the requirements of two courses--Teaching Strategies and Classroom Learning Principles--students tutor 60 hours each semester at centers for the homeless. The primary role of the tutors is to meet with children and adults in study areas set up at the homeless centers and to give them academic support and encouragement. The tutors also support curricular congruence by communicating regularly with the children's classroom teachers and by meeting weekly with them to share the children's progress folders. Not surprisingly, the teachers have reported that their homeless

students have demonstrated marked improvement with school performance.

Homeless students have strong potential for achieving the same learning outcomes as their peers from more stable, advantaged homes. With genuine love and substantive support, and with no naivete intended, we can help these young people enrich their personal and academic lives.